

Sydney Bernard Smith

Girl
with Violin



POETRY IRELAND EDITIONS 3

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Poetry Ireland Editions

The Dolmen Press



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For Tom MacIntyre

Portstewart

Derry's contours lap the sea
around the Bann; fishermen
row dumbly to their nets, & visitors
parade the prom, or rendezvous
at tennish, in the Diamond.

boldly, the square-edged Protestant
church attacks the hill: our own
— yellow, smoothfaced — elided, star of the sea,
into the Crescent; we confess,
emerge, gaze at the Rock.

I have been creeping there for years
in dreams; not wanting to return
to dwell in the foreign land of youth, but in
search of the place's unsoured peace;
wet roads, cars on the strand,

hedges of hawthorn between the fields
to Burnside, here my father's grave —
the trees echo loud with untutored rooks —
unassuming like the man
who lies in the earth, awake.

there is no violence here in colour,
in language, thought or in myself;
there is, even, at this distance, no sorrow;
a sense of family, of belonging,
almost a sense of love.

and in the Montagu there dwell
the Miss O'Doherties, whose eyes
know only how to smile and to be kind
— like the mild unfrantic summers,
or the fresh sea.

this is not running away,
not being sentimental; they,
for me, this place, this frank gray life, this business
of summer visitors, and dead
trade in the winter meant

home, simplicity; the world
was, what was the case, and is,
winter fires of the ocean roared;
I liked them, but they never rocked
my soul. was I right

is not the question, then I clung
tranquilly to what I knew;
bare feet wired to the course headland grass,
the thunder of the sea.

The High King's Uncle T.

so here lies I
recumbent in the middle of the way
— lushest plain in Leinster — lord
of nothing but my own ploughed soul

and of the roads I motor over,
they dip to the Liffey were
between trees a moon
fell, tasting mud.

and what do my horizons care
for any file of government?
I feel where the earth stands in
under my fingernails.

On Lettermullan

wind keens over the island, loud and strong,
and away on the other side of the wind, song

— it might have been here he drowned

where the sea sways down
in one movement, dark-blue
spraysown, the rough-walled
end of the road to the isles.
across the running bay mountains
blend white and heather.
If you have tears prepare to have
that heavy breeze make slivers of them
at the corner of your eye. it will
readily blow a gulp down your throat.
no sort of weather for a small boat.

is it not strange that he should
go looking for solitude
even further away than the lonely
church triumphant that serves this
waste anchored with rocks, this open
house of the Lord, this hermit's

Connemara — by this windfresh western sea
when his breath stifled who saw the soul rise free?

I do not weep by burnt blue sea, sunwhite stones
for nearness, the love, the unfleshed bones.

The Late K.T.

one evening in march this year 1965
I found myself driving after eleven o'clock
along a fairway lit to port and starboard
by pairs of accusing green eyes
and small shy ones that went on and off
sheep and lambs naturally of thought of Katherine Tynan.

stopping on Straffan bridge I saw

the moon creating mad white irony on top of the Liffey
a post nuclear glow in the sky over Dublin, to these
I will now add (3)

a dark cow etched against the gloom under trees — fiction.
being always a man for the needless histrionic I threw
my hat on the river or at the river then drove home at a
furious pace and covered four pages with K.
Tynan's rhythm — pfuah!

Bettystown

what if before cars & transistors
it was here the winter-sailing Vikings
fell from the horizon, breathless
with misdeeds to do, waded ashore
with bearded cries, clangour of fierce
metal – what strange thwacks did they
deal in the name of our weekdays?

a sputter of white low tide where
miniscule bathing figures, suncloud, are shouting
against the blue. their voices float
from ancient danish dublin. it is Thursday.

minuscule bathing figures, suncloud, are shouting
against the blue. their voices float
from ancient danish dublin. it is Thursday.

Death, Putative Father

will come for me, old man – I can feel him
in old-young loss of rude
lust – fall on
me in a moment of
debility, as after whiskey:

like realising red eyes in the
morning mirror, catchment
area for the glad dregs of living;
his sore claw private-scratching, with
nondescript humming of one

whose mind is on another job entirely,
close me, abstracted fist
or crushed shell of a beetle;
and no great grief at the going out only
a firm sigh — pray one thing,

that the long
standing duality of grandfather
clock belief and un-
mechanised belief does not come
against me in that hideous unsocketing

of the unit, me.

An Irish Childhood

discontented women in the house: their voices
rise through wooden floors, traverse
walls, climb bannisters, all parts, psalm for the dead,
the holy souls, Jesus falls the first time —

the peregrinal landscape of middle age,
what stocky legs those mothers of ours
develop, what a devotional waddle!

Small Town in the Republic

round the square, a white stock-
ade of houses throws back the shock
of voices — they are getting out of the last
bus in a town the bog laps.

between the human sounds gaps
reveal a decay of light,
an ambushing of the present by the past
activities — they rage
about what, there on the edge of night?

The First Day of the Week

dearly beloved he said
the sides of his face hung wide,
a pack load, two points
below the line of jaw
being near eighty, dearly beloved...

we will rise again today's epistle.
Doctrine — the word was a study for love
the way he spoke it into the magnum
silentium of his seminary years —

not just a body, not a soul
only but if please God we die
in grace immorta glory body *and* soul
and none of this waxen

grey I am about to fall to
attenuation because
cancer, the blood —
my brother died yesterday dearly beloved ...

Corpus Christi, amen, well I suppose so.

and in his flesh will he see God?

1930 Building, Clongowes

on the right hand of this door coming out
twenty thousand years ago a limestone
shellfish n this very first morning split an
instant, broke its rays open, trod them into me
at eye-level, flashed;

school went on
settling four-square into Kildare land.

One Sunday Morning

the power of reason cannot comprehend
the peoples of my truth uprising
out of the land, behind or to one side
like something glimpsed in the corner of the eye;
their features are not clearly seen,
embossed, worn, on Celtic crosses.

the power of reason is not that which brings
out the blood in Virginia creeper in the
month of October, to glisten in sun,
nor even what makes a window
(the roof leaks, will fall in any day,
walls are due to come down within the year,
but still a Georgian window) interesting.

It is not the power of reason nor of words
can figure out the whole lot —
cross man, alterable
woman, nor even the strange metal strivings
(nothing subversive here) of television
aerials on an old castle, strictly celibate.

Romeo Espresso Dubliniensis

you are a bird, my love, and I a bloke,
our food fond thoughts of love, our nectar coke;
seeing us here disjointed, who would think
our fingers interlaced beneath the zinc?

O'Connell Street¹ —
Oft in the Stilly Night

Failte romhat go hEirinn
say electronic chimes,
where folk are behind the clergy, and
the clergy behind the times.

VW Sensualist

ten horses in that high powered whine.
from night, cats' eyes, double jewel
(I drive astride the centre line)
come wham wham wham wham at my navel.

Two Dogs

around the floor
exploring paws
puppy-search
old nature's laws;
the white bitch sleeps
with rat-trap jaws.

¹ McDowell's by the Pillar as was. The first line means: *Welcome to Ireland*.

Nude

though puritans raise flannel grey
walls to curtain off the day,
put moral blinkers on the horse —
I find their ready texture coarse,
leap the wall and tear apart
friend Jansen's jock-strap for the heart.
a flowing stream of honey thigh
I marvel with unshaded eye,
bounding upwards to the grace
of two shaped minims hung in space,
dominant; clustere over these,
laughter and a swarm of bees;
simple rosebuds promise milk,
starry on the sunsmoth silk,
while, sprouting at the crown of fire,
a sprig of heather twangs its lyre:

for this ambition-stirring sight
the Lord provides a perfect light —
give thanks to Him! whatever else is
pondered, Gloria in excelsis!

Nocturne I

I climbed the stairs the oher night,
though a window saw the mon, bright
red, like living blood; it shone
on ghostly dark blue shapes, and on

me; its red heat filled the sky,
Good moon yourself, well jarred — say I.

Prayer before Class

o mornings that throw back the heads of the young

(they feel the attack of sweat — it is
small leaf on the hawthorn so that

even lessons are a communion, an accomplishment)
if rising from Kildare earth

like mist I might breathe — no,
if I might set foot in your ear ...

A Repayment

evening grows, fuses, glows
with your warm hands in mine,
eyes alive with green delight
child-content, cared for;

the day faltered, sick (skull
was a glacial boulder) until
this laying of trust in my palm

flowed, hot balm to the furious eyelids;
my nose full of tears, heaven-fields
spring to the mind's eye — love surprised

has no time to cry
out in force; merely
evening, a look into green evening.

Girl with Violin

she prays with the bow; a straight
white sound points, with precision
shudders the vibrant rough-pure string;
within the very oyster of my soul
I quake.

I cannot grasp the naked phrase —
trembling from her, it leaps in the air,
disciplined, dancing, curious, alive
to me, steps direct across the floor
of doubt, answering before I ask.
serene brown eyes belie the tone
of Mozart-tension.

for the time
confident, I will make poetry.

Here come my guilt, my loneliness, my fear.

Viewpoint

I looked in my limbs, my brain
for some trace, picture, passion
of youth — gone like the court
of Tara;
nothing but raised earth works
and the far blue of plains.

All Done with Mirrors

in that hall of mirrors, my imagination,
light not falling logically, situations

seen from all round at once, are bent,
splintered, fifty-five ways in an instant.

so many fractions
bewilder reactions

often; but lovers' deceits,
themselves a trick of the light, show
chessboard possibilities, retreats,

lines of boldness, pawns passing
unseen through each other (no
rules, love's anarchy, declassing

what to the ordinary eye looks
not one game, but thirty-two
compound simultaneous treacheries;
is made simple to me) necessities
take over, total checkmate locks
the board, black on white, me on you.

in my hall of mirrors, one thing
rings clear from the multiplicities:
from every square queen's lures assault the king.

The Day of the Funeral

why so brave?
could there be anything left to save?

that curtain of tears would fall
if he dared to move at all,

kept his shoulders
still against the wall.

my mother is dead
the brown eyes said.

Fatal

early on, mist stood around
snuffling under trees in the parkland,

towards midday when I was out for a walk
the sun shone with clumsy October warmth.
my fingers smoothing the nape rolled
an infant spider into a crumb of agony,
dropped him away.

Reproach

(for M.)

after thirteen years in the dark
wood of love; like a hawk
hounded, pecked by birds
(that is, people who don't know);

being in fact the dark wood uncaring
with friends only in the forestry
commission, McIntyres, a few
others who did and do know; then

you, a lamp going up
into your own shoal of light — I was
no longer an undergrowth of adolescence,
but a man in real bloody love.

no. or so you would say. If
you would think well of me, think
I am one who
wishes to be truth.

my existence
stretched like a tympanum was
not eloquence enough to stand
beside your name

therefore you may not have
heard my faltering, defaulting
— dammit! my love (for you, like
nothing only tides urge on a strand),

my only moral choice,
that slight way of saying the word
that stands out of self, coming
into another. I was to have been

Heracles, to take the sea
by its white collar, roll it back
— what would lie bare, tense
with dark gratitude? —

as it is the virgin on the rocks
remains, strange as the sea;
hero has been devoured in the act of rescue;
look — serpent coming! it's all his fault!

Before Sleep

lids at rest, an hour
I lay thinking;
eye that is me, unwinking
out on the end of a stalk,
flamed toward you in the dark.

Wind Tunnel

what will withstand
the male demand —
and has such fury
no other end?

The Hard Stuff

in a broken cask
the spirit I bonded
was vapour
before you responded.

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